

**A New Role For Police Officers:  
Investment in High School Education**

**by**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

A New Role For Police Officers:  
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California's high school students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. Not only does this have the potential to negatively impact the individual child by not providing a solid base of knowledge and skill sets required to succeed in a new global economy, the failure of students in the educational system can create unneeded problems and increased workloads for local law enforcement agencies.

Dropouts from school are more than just a problem for educators; those students become a burden on society. According to Colleen Wilber, a spokeswoman for America's Promise Alliance, dropouts end up in jail, on welfare rolls or without health insurance. The group estimates this can cost taxpayers more than \$320 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity over a lifetime.<sup>1</sup> To impact that trend, local law enforcement agencies would be best served by working collaboratively to assist school districts to create environments that reduce dropout rates and ensure students are better equipped to handle the pressures and challenges of a changing world.

California schools are facing a crisis. According to several reports completed in the past couple of years, the numbers of students who fail to complete high school or complete their educations on time are on the rise. The California Research Bureau reports that although the dropout rates for students between 1992 and 2005 fell from 20 percent to 13 percent, the percentage of students who graduated high school in 2004 was

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<sup>1</sup> A plan to cut high school drop out rates, The New York Times, Winnie Hu (October 26, 2008)

just short of 71 percent.<sup>2</sup> The California Report Card completed by Children Now reports that California ranks 38<sup>th</sup> in high school completion rates at 65 percent in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Depending on the report that is cited, the number of California students who fail to complete high school range from 30 percent to 40 percent per year.<sup>4</sup> According to the California Dropout Research Project, the estimates are that almost 120,000 students each year fail to get a high school diploma by the age of 20.<sup>5</sup> In 2005, there were more than 4 million in individuals in California between the ages of 18-64 who did not have a high school diploma.<sup>6</sup>

Originally, the number of students who failed complete high school seemed manageable to most officials. The actual numbers, however, have recently shown to be higher than previously reported.<sup>7</sup> One reason for this gap in knowing the actual number of dropouts was difficulty tracking students who left one school and enrolled in another. In 2006, though, the CA Department of Education implemented a tracking system that shows the number of dropouts is higher than previously reported. The system also allows State officials to determine where students are going and in some cases, why. According to state Superintendent of Education Jack O'Connell, this will help in understanding the nature of dropouts and produce data that will help address the problems.<sup>8</sup> Although the interpretation of data from the system is still in the initial stages, analysts are working to

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<sup>2</sup> High School Dropouts, enrollment, and graduations rates in California, California Research Bureau, November 2005

<sup>3</sup> California Report Card 2008, Children Now, 2008

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> High school dropouts cost state billions, SFGate.com, Asimov, Nanette (February 28, 2008)

<sup>6</sup> California Dropout Research Project, UC Santa Barbara, Belfield, Clive & Levin, Henry, August 2007

<sup>7</sup> 1 in 4 California high school students drop out, state says, Los Angeles Times, Landsberg, Mitchell, July 17, 2008

<sup>8</sup> 1 in 4 California high school students drop out, state says, Los Angeles Times, Landsberg, Mitchell, July 17, 2008

compare old to new data to get a better handle on dropout trends and numbers. Even critics of the system call it a 'step in the right direction' as a means to get a better clue as to what factors play into a student's decision to dropout of school.

Although the numbers have been steady for the last few years, California's dropout rate (and that of the Nation) places it well behind their counterparts in other countries. As a result, some students in California school systems are ill prepared to enter society or the American workforce. This exacerbates issues of unemployment and underemployment throughout the State.

Researchers at the California Dropout Research Project estimated that California sustains a loss of \$46.4 billion in economic losses for each cohort of 120,000 individuals under 20 who fail to complete high school. More than 2/3 of high school dropouts will require public assistance such as food stamps or other welfare programs and incarceration rates among Black male dropouts is at least 60 percent.<sup>9</sup> Currently, just about 65% of California's high school students graduate on time with a regular high school diploma. This puts California in the 38<sup>th</sup> position in the nation. In a report by Children Now: California's Report Card, the state has made aggressive moves to redesign the education system to help students raise their levels of competencies. Rigorous test scores, more accountability in the classroom and aligning mismatch curriculums have been some of the steps to help achieve these goals.<sup>10</sup>

Students today are facing pressures that most of us in the preceding generation never had. Violence on school campuses continues to rise and the pressures around standardized testing is making it less likely that students will continue with their

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<sup>9</sup> California Dropout Research Project, UC Santa Barbara, Belfield, Clive & Levin, Henry, August 2007

<sup>10</sup> Children Now; California Report Card, 2008, The state of the State's Children

educations. Hillary Rodham Clinton once coined the phrase ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. Perhaps now is the time to bring the village closer together to educate and properly prepare that child for success.

#### Impacts on the Justice System

A high school dropout not only affects the job market, but the justice system as well. They are more than eight times more likely to be in jail or prison. Since we spend only \$9644 per student per year as compared to \$22,600 per inmate, the raw dollar cost is significant. Translated, if we could increase the high school completion rate by just one percent, the United States could save approximately \$1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime.<sup>11</sup> About 100,000 California children are involved in the juvenile justice system each year, and spending on youth corrections has increased by almost 77% since 2000. In contrast, the money spent on prevention programs for young offenders has decreased by 2% in that same timeframe.

One could conclude from the data that priorities for law enforcement spending have been more reactive than proactive. Law enforcement leaders should consider not only focusing more effort to prevention programs per se, but also to mitigate dropout rates by lending their efforts in more creative ways. Police agencies have traditionally been on the receiving end of poorly performing students. Those that lack social skills and lower educational levels seem to find themselves in more trouble with the law. Police agencies would be better served if they could provide security and stability in the educational environment and make learning a place to excel rather than one to avoid.

Law enforcement leaders must begin to look at how they can assist school

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<sup>11</sup> The high cost of low educational attainment, Council on Virginia's future, [www.future.virginia.gov/docs/IssueInsights/Insight1.pdf](http://www.future.virginia.gov/docs/IssueInsights/Insight1.pdf), August 2008

systems in creating environments that will enhance the learning experience as well as creating a positive influence in some students who might be considering a career in public service. If not, those students who fail to complete a high school education will most likely become frequent consumers of the criminal justice system.

#### Fight Crime: Invest In Kids

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids is a national group of more than 350 police and law enforcement executives who are working towards keeping kids in school. It is a non-partisan group committed to crime prevention strategies geared towards investing in school programs that are evidenced based. The primary aim is to provide school aged children a good start in life by working with law makers and educators to provide early education programs, after school programs, and working with troubled youths as a means of deterring them from criminal activity and possibly incarceration.<sup>12</sup>

Fight Crime is a strong advocate of crime prevention programs that show results. According to their research, children who attended pre-kindergarten programs had lower drug use, higher graduation rates, fewer instances of welfare receipt and overall lower crimes involvement.<sup>13</sup> Other police executives may look to Fight Crime: Invest in Kids for new and innovative ways to address criminal behavior before it starts, rather than to address it after the fact. In a report sponsored by the group specific to Fresno, CA, a boost in graduation rates could prevent as many as 700 assaults and 15 murders per year in that community. Jerry Dyer, Fresno's Chief of Police, is active in the group. He said his hope is to use that data to help influence educators to collaborate more closely in their efforts to raise graduation rates. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids contends that Fresno's data

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<sup>12</sup> Fight Crime: Invest in Kids website, <http://www.fightcrime.org/aboutus.php>

<sup>13</sup> Preventing crime with Pre-Kindergarten: A critical investment in California's Safety, Fight Crime: Invest in Kids,

is valid on a larger scale, and that graduation from high school leads to productive adults who will shy away from crime as a means of survival.<sup>14</sup>

Even data from within the educational community supports the beliefs of the police executives actively engaged in school-related efforts. Education Week's "Quality Counts" report, announced January 3, 2007, that early educational efforts are key indicators of future success.<sup>15</sup> According to Project Editor Lynn Olson, this focus on education needs to span across the entire educational curriculum. Other studies show that students who fail to achieve a high school education are destined to have lower income potential, higher medical and dental needs and engage in increased anti-social behaviors in general.<sup>16</sup> All of these factors play a role in maintaining a healthy and productive society. If law enforcement is to continue its mission of protecting society and creating this safe community, it must begin to play a more active role in development of its citizens.

What can we do?

Law enforcement leaders can help schools by looking at the younger aged children and at ways they can effectively participate in the systems that will allow for students to succeed. By the time students are reaching middle school grades, the dynamics of the school environment change in ways that are not necessarily productive for good learning. Approximately 40% of middle and high school students reported that students have brought some type of weapon to school. This has the potential to create an unsafe environment and one that will impede a student from doing well in school. On the

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<sup>14</sup> "Study ties drop-outs to violent crime; Raising the number of kids in school could reduce assaults, murders". The Fresno Bee (January 3, 2008)

<sup>15</sup> Studies show state's students ill-prepared for work force, Arizona Daily Star, Sanchez, George B., January 3, 2007

<sup>16</sup> Children Now; California Report Card, 2008, The state of the State's Children



extreme end, a student who feels threatened and intimidated may opt out of attending school altogether.

Law enforcement agencies can have a huge impact in this area by investing resources and expertise to schools to find ways to create a safe and healthy environment, thus creating a foundation for a student's success in school. In February 2008, The Stanislaus County CA Office of Education, in cooperation with The Modesto City School District, hosted a community meeting including 75 youths was held to find out why students drop out of school. Gangs, drugs and bullying topped the list of reasons why many students fail to obtain a high school diploma.<sup>17</sup> By working with school administrators, though, law enforcement administrators can help assess possible threats to students and design buildings and classrooms that minimize risk. In Seattle, for instance, many older schools are modernizing and rebuilding schools to allow for more supervision, greater visibility of common areas and security measures to meet many possible threats.<sup>18</sup>

Private-public partnerships may be the best starting point for programs and efforts that benefit both the school systems and local law enforcement agencies. In San Gabriel, California, partnerships with the police have included schools, non-profit agencies, and families directly<sup>19</sup>. According to "Peggy" a neighborhood Watch Captain in San Gabriel, California one of the underlying philosophies is to empower the people of San Gabriel in taking responsibility for the community and look to the police for assistance, not to rely on them to solve all the problems.

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<sup>17</sup> Why drop out? Youths say what's wrong, what's needed, Modesto Bee, Hatfield, Michelle, Feb. 6, 2009

<sup>18</sup> Making schools safe, The Seattle Times, Tuinstra, Rachel, January 8, 2007

<sup>19</sup> San Gabriel Grapevine Autumn 2008, Volume 12-Issue VIII

According to the National Night out Website, the San Gabriel program, in partnership with their existing Neighborhood Watch, heightens focus on crime prevention, generates support for anti-crime programs, and strengthens neighborhood spirit and police-community relationships. This partnership is nothing new, but is one that requires a concerted effort and change in culture within the police department and also the community as a whole. Direct links have also been established with each of the administrators at local schools in San Gabriel so problems can be identified and mitigated long before they become a social concern. This may not be a new concept in policing, but one that is surely worthy of exploration.

The U.S. Department of Justice has established a program under its COPS grants that awards departments and allows for the hiring of officers who work in and around primary and secondary schools. The program, Cops in Schools, in conjunction with the Department of Education and Human Services, is aimed at providing enhanced benefits to children in the area of education, mental health services and early childhood development.<sup>20</sup> Many of the other aims of the program deal with school safety and safe school planning, cultural diversity and collaborative problem solving skills among the police and school educators. Some, though, want to take this concept much further.

In Tennessee, school officials are looking to create their own police departments. There are many school districts that employ full time officers to patrol their campuses. The rationale to expand to create a separate department involves retaining officers committed to specific issues surrounding education and having them as a part of the school staff. Linda Delaney, Principal of Knox county's Intermediate Schools says "having that presence in the school would build a great relationship between officers and

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Department of Justice Website, <http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=54>

the students”.<sup>21</sup> In other states, work to create a better school environment and to enhance graduation rates seeks involvement from the private sector.

In October 2008, New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine announced a yearlong initiative to help boost graduation rates. The approach involves partnerships with Verizon and Prudential, who will work with community and industry leaders, with help from America’s Promise, a children’s advocacy group set up by Colin Powell in 1997. The aim is to keep kids in school, through graduation, and provide them with the skills to succeed. Colleen Wilber, a spokesperson for the alliance says that drop outs are not solely problems for schools any longer, as they will become a burden to society. She says “we think that solving the drop out crisis is going to take the entire community...not only schools and parents, but business, faith based and non profits are going to be there”.<sup>22</sup> If there is evidence these partnerships have quantifiable benefits in the form of job skills and knowledge, and teachers who are enthusiastic who will motivate students into specific fields of studies, can these models be created in the field of law enforcement with similar results?

In the past, most partnerships have involved the use of guest speakers, special promotions or other incentives geared towards motivating and promoting specific industries. According to the national Association of Partners in Education, though, many of these programs do little to facilitate fundamental change in classroom teaching and learning.<sup>23</sup> Indications are those programs that focus on teachers, more than industry content, fared better to produce the kinds of students that business leaders were interested in employing. One of the many tactics used were to employ teachers in specific

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<sup>21</sup> Police forces for schools studied, Knox News Sentinel August 20, 2007

<sup>22</sup> A plan to cut the High School Drop Out Rate, New Your Times, Winnie Hu. (Oct. 26,2008)

<sup>23</sup> Education-Partnerships: Scientific work experience programs. 1993

businesses over summer breaks to give them real world knowledge in the work force as a means of bettering their understandings and abilities to teach in the classrooms.

It is possible for law enforcement professionals to use some of these same strategies to accomplish both the objectives of the school and the community. By educating teachers on some of the darker sides of juvenile delinquency, it may be possible for teachers to better manage potential hostile classrooms. Estimates from the California Now Report indicate that approximately 40% of middle and high school students reported that students have brought some type of weapon to school. This has the potential to create an unsafe environment and one that will impede a student from doing well in school. On the extreme end, a student who feels threatened and intimidated may opt out of attending school altogether.<sup>24</sup> If law enforcement agencies can impact this area by providing real world information and experiences to teachers, the potential for creating a healthier educational environment may exist.

### Conclusion

As the dynamics of our society continues to change and the economy of the United States becomes more closely aligned with a global one, California schools are going to need to work harder and smarter in the way it educates our children. To do that, it will take the efforts of many interested partners, law enforcement in specific, to help achieve this goal. The value of a high school education cannot be understated. High school graduates earn more money, enjoy better health and social benefits and are less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system. Police agencies are already seeing the effect of a slacking economy, and the effects may be seen for many years to come. Police agencies will struggle to fund traditional services, much less keep up with a

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<sup>24</sup> "California Report Card, 2008", Children Now; [Childrennow.org](http://Childrennow.org) (2008)

rising jail population. Agencies executive would be well served if they find creative ways to assist schools in their efforts to graduate students who will enter this ever changing workforce.

There is no argument the police are desperately needed on the streets to fight crime; it is also true they can do more than react. By investing in early educational programs that lay the foundation for successful schools and student success. That success translates to a lessening impact on criminal justice, an outcome worthy of effort by us all.